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ABSTRACT

Student attitudes toward foreign language instruction are examined by means of an overview of 12 surveys conducted at high schools and colleges across the U.S. Findings indicate that students who are unsatisfied with their progress in learning a foreign language may have set unrealistic goals for themselves at the outset. Often they feel they are misled about what they will learn and the effort required. Students were also asked why they had enrolled in a foreign language course. Their reactions to teachers, programmed instruction, textbooks, and the language laboratory, are presented. (Author/RL)

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND REACTIONS TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Cheryl Dernorsek

Rarely do researchers set out to examine student expectations in a foreign language class out of the larger context of a general study of attitudes toward foreign languages. For this reason the best source of information to date on the goals that the student expects to achieve remains the attitude study. The same can be said for research on student reactions to foreign languages. Attitude studies have for the most part been conducted on a small scale, usually for the benefit of a single department or school system, their results have been used primarily for internal prognosis rather than as information for the profession. Published reports of attitude studies are not numerous, but among those that have become reasonably well known are the studies of student attitudes by Lambert, Gardner, Jakobovits, Feenstra, and others who were not concerned so much with the attitudes themselves but rather with how they affect performance.¹

When questions pertaining to student expectations are included as part of an attitude study, the data both for high school and college students support the statements made in the Northeast Conference Report of 1970 that students often formulate unrealistic goals for themselves based on the advice of teachers and administrators who are trying to boost foreign language enrollments.² This, as the report points out, provides a built-in potential disappointment and loss of motivation for the student as soon as he realizes that he will fall far short of his expectations.³ In a study involving 375 students in basic French courses at the University of Kentucky in 1970,⁴ sixty-four percent of the "A" students and eighty percent of the "B" students in the group felt they failed to measure up to their goals.⁵ These better students probably had set their sights even higher than had the average student in the class whose impression of what could be learned was already an exaggeration. In a case where the teacher feels that the student has mastered the course objectives so well that he merits an "A", and yet more than two-thirds of these same students consider their performance disappointing, then some effort to realign the expectations of students and teachers is essential. How many students assume that the two year language requirement is such because that is the time necessary for mastery of a language? Besides giving an inaccurate impression of what can be learned within the time allotted, students accuse teachers of treating foreign languages as an all or nothing proposition. In a student position paper prepared during a weekend workshop in Michigan in 1971,⁶ the participants felt that their disappointment in not achieving their goals was aggravated by the teacher who concluded that their accomplishment was so infinitesimal compared to the effort expended as to be nearly worthless. The students said they would prefer to be reminded that what they have learned, they have learned well. After all, they wrote, one is not an artist after one art course. The student remains all too aware of how his knowledge of the foreign language compares to that of his mother tongue.

In addition to holding certain ideas about how much he will learn, the student enters the classroom with impressions about what he will learn. As

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Jakobovits writes, "The quality of instruction depends on the extent to which it is made clear to the learner just what he is supposed to be learning at each level."⁷ Often students express disappointment about the fact that they thought they were going to learn to speak the foreign language. The emphasis on writing and reading will come as a surprise if the student has not been made aware at the outset of the course objectives. In a study done in a large suburban high school in New England,⁸ the students desired a speaking approach and more emphasis on culture; the teacher appeared to be working toward establishing a strong foundation in grammar for writing and reading. Students writing the Michigan position paper wanted to practice speaking even if their grammar was incorrect. To them their efforts at speaking were thwarted by the teacher who was concerned with correct grammar. Sarita Schotta, in an attitude study to be published in *FIA*,⁹ quotes the reaction of a college student: "Our teacher never talks Spanish to us because it takes up too much time from the grammar."

The way students perceive they learned English influences their approach toward learning the foreign language. This is especially important in the case of a student whose goal is to speak the language. He remembers from his learning of English that he learned to speak first and then later went back to examine the intricacies of the structures and patterns. He does not necessarily expect the teacher to dwell on grammar, as is indicated in this comment on the questionnaire in the New England high school study: "I think that if for a half year we could listen and speak French and then in the second half go back and find the reasons for what we said in French that we would be learning the fundamentals of the language."¹⁰ In this student's view the fundamentals mean learning how to speak the foreign language. To concentrate on other skills appears to be bypassing the basics which the student feels he agreed to learn when he enrolled in the course. In Sarita Schotta's study, students responded in the same manner, advocating speaking before acquiring "linguistic finesse."¹¹

In some cases the students have little idea at all about what to expect because course objectives in terms of terminal behavior are not explained. Robert Morrey of the San Mateo High School District found that in a study of student attitudes toward individualized instruction students expressed dissatisfaction with the idea that they were expected to know what to learn.¹² Even in an institution with a traditional approach, students may be in the dark about what to expect. The University of Kentucky study showed that the course objectives were obscure to all the students participating in the study.

Competence in the foreign language constitutes an important criterion that students use to determine if the teacher meets their expectations. They want to hear the teacher use the foreign language as much as possible. Studies on the high school level and on the college level indicate that students expect to hear more of the target language than is presently the case. They resent a steady diet of grammar explanations in English and feel they are sacrificing learning the language to learning about it. The 1970-71 San Mateo High School survey yields some information about what students expect from teachers in addition to their language ability. They emphasized the importance of being able to relate to students and to interact with them.

Most of the attitude studies from which these comments on student expectations are drawn also attempted to investigate student reactions to the instruction they have received. These reactions surface in response to questions about requirements, teachers, methods, texts, and lab. There is much agreement among

students on the various issues regardless of the level of instruction.

In order for the researcher to have some idea of the basic orientation of the participating students toward foreign languages and so determine in what context to interpret their remarks, they were frequently asked why they had enrolled in the course. In Edmonds, Washington, where Harry Reinert conducted a district-wide survey in 1970,¹³ over half the students reporting cited college admission and degree requirements as their reason for enrolling. The State Department of Education in Virginia asked 4,100 high school students in 1970 to list in order of importance the reasons for their election of a foreign language. College requirements topped the list.¹⁴ The San Mateo High School District study found thirty-eight percent of the sample enrolling for the same reason. On the college level, fifty-seven percent of the students questioned at the University of Kentucky gave the desire to satisfy a requirement as their sole motivation. The percentage was even higher among students in the Pennsylvania State University Foreign Language Survey.¹⁵ Eighty-one percent of the students surveyed had enrolled because of the requirement even though half of these (forty-nine percent) said they would have elected a foreign language anyway even without the requirement.

Among the other reasons mentioned for taking a foreign language were interest (integrative orientation) and also advice of parents and counselors (instrumental orientation).¹⁶ In the Edmonds (Washington) High School survey, 30.9% were integratively oriented and 12.1% instrumentally oriented. Only a very small percentage hoped to use their language for travel (5.8%). The figures for the San Mateo High School District fell into these same general categories: twenty-four percent reported interest as their motivating factor and nine percent felt they would need it for their career (here travel as a motivation climbed to eighteen percent). The list compiled as part of the Virginia State Department of Education Survey yielded interest as the second most important reason for electing a foreign language. The next four reasons suggest instrumental orientation: high school graduation, counselor's advice, parents' advice, career purposes. In surveys taken at colleges, however, the percentage of students who indicate an integrative orientation in their reasons for studying language is noticeably lower than at the high school level. In the Pennsylvania State University survey, for example, the percentage of integratively oriented students was only eighteen percent, while fourteen percent proved to be instrumentally oriented. Travel as a motivation also increased again--this time to thirty percent. Similarly, nineteen percent of the students in the University of Kentucky study were integratively oriented, but here the percentage of instrumentally oriented students rose to twenty-four percent. In other words, college students are less likely to take a language because of interest as opposed to utilitarian reasons. In the study undertaken by Sarita Schotta at an unnamed university, students were allowed to state more than one reason for enrolling in a foreign language. Seventy-six percent indicated they were taking a foreign language both because they were interested and because they wanted to fulfill a requirement. Thus, anyone examining reactions to various aspects of a foreign language curriculum should bear in mind that about half the students enroll because they have to. Their subsequent remarks on the subject of foreign languages may be influenced by this forced enrollment.

In many cases, students react unfavorably to the work load in a foreign language course; they are unprepared for either the nature or volume of study required. A comment from the New England high school survey illustrates a student's assumptions: "French...is an 'alive' language, that is to say, it seems

to be something a student can grasp and enjoy without too much effort"¹⁷ It comes as no surprise then that later reactions are so vociferous. The Michigan Student Position Paper cited the amount of work as a cause of attrition among high school students. University of Illinois students ran a study¹⁸ in 1968 of reactions to foreign languages in which seventy-six percent of the sample judged foreign languages to require more study time than other subjects. Likewise, at the University of Michigan, students voiced objection not only to the volume of material but also to the regular, frequent study it demands.¹⁹ The same study revealed that students feel that language study is not an intellectually stimulating activity. T. Mueller in the report on the University of Kentucky study wrote, "a significant percentage (of students) rated the course as least liked, boring, frustrating, useless, unimportant and irrelevant; viewed the grammatical explanations as unclear and insufficient; labeled class work and homework as boring, useless and frustrating..."²⁰ Presumably many of these reactions can be traced to the students' initial misconceptions about the work in the course.

Questions about teachers figure prominently in many of the studies since student opinions about the teacher influence their reactions to all other aspects of the course. Students writing the Michigan Student Position Paper view too much English in class and poor pronunciation of the foreign language as the major linguistic faults of their teachers. Unfamiliarity with the foreign culture is also judged a serious defect. The inability to inspire students, to interact with them, and to maintain their confidence causes unfavorable reactions as well. Most students in the New England high school survey stated they had a sincere desire to learn to speak the language which was sometimes thwarted by the teacher. Before sampling student opinion, Professor Schotta in her study at a state university asked the teachers to anticipate their students' remarks. After administering the questionnaire, the faculty discovered they had significantly overrated their students' opinions. In the students' view, teachers who ridicule and embarrass students commit an unpardonable offense. They take exception to teachers who spring "sneaky tests" on their classes. Teachers who fail to tell students what is expected of them and who convey boredom and indifference also meet with disapproval from these students. Another area of criticism, for which the faculty is not wholly responsible, is teacher discontinuity, according to Sarita Schotta's study. It remains as severe a problem for students as does the lack of articulation between levels of instruction.

The adoption of programmed instruction gave rise to a few studies on student reactions to methods. Generally speaking, students using programmed instruction have more positive attitudes about foreign language learning, as shown in Mueller's study at the University of Kentucky, than do students in a traditional class. However, they do claim to get bored faster and to be left uncertain about what they are supposed to be learning, so that results are still inconclusive as to the value of the method in terms of its appeal to students. Even so, students in the Kentucky study who had not been exposed to programmed instruction and who were using either an AV text or a traditional text seem to desire a change in method. It is perhaps significant that in the San Mateo study of individualized instruction, forty percent of the students said they would prefer learning in a traditional manner the first year and then using individualized techniques after they have acquired the basics. (On this questionnaire as well as others, questions about materials turned up comments about teachers as often as not.) Published reactions to traditional teaching

are not hard to come by but they express essentially the same objections that have been around for years, namely, that students still frown upon translation into English (Michigan Student Position Paper) and oppose the constant use of the same method rather than any method in particular (New England High School Study). As always, they resent having to readjust to different methods from one year to the next (Michigan Student Position Paper).

More specific than their reactions to methods are student evaluations of textbooks. Sarita Schotta pointed out in her study that in spite of the availability of laboratory equipment, most students continue to rely on their text as their primary learning tool.²¹ In the University of Kentucky study in which the students were grouped according to the text they were using, the relative merits of the book's grammatical explanations were examined. Students could describe these explanations as clear or unclear and sufficient or insufficient (see Appendix Two). The traditional text fared the worst since well over fifty percent of the respondents judged it to be unclear and insufficient. The percentages were improved for two groups of students using audio-lingual texts. The programmed text received the highest evaluation; sixty-three percent of the students felt its explanations were clear and forty-four percent said they were sufficient.

Studies of student reactions to the language laboratory fall into two categories: those that try to ascertain the value of the laboratory in foreign language learning and those that want to determine the most profitable laboratory activities. Of the first type is Sarita Schotta's study at a state university. In addition to finding student opinions toward foreign languages to be generally more adverse than they had imagined, the faculty discovered that students harbor no more resentment for the language laboratory than for their regular classes. That is not to say that they approve of either. However, some teachers, as in this case, presume that student opinion of their overall foreign language experience suffers mainly because of their loathing of the laboratory. Students complained that they get no credit for lab work and only twenty-four percent said they went voluntarily. (The lab in question is described as a listen-respond laboratory with no provision for recording one's own voice.) Nearly fifty percent said they went because their instructor required it and twenty-six percent said they never went at all. Nearly half the students found the lab to be poorly coordinated with their classwork. In fact one student wrote, "Until I saw Question IV, I never thought about the things in class being coordinated with the lab, but I think it is a good idea."²² The school's language program would not suffer at all if the language laboratory were to close, according to sixty percent of the students. They may have been reflecting the attitudes of their teachers to some extent since eighty-two percent reported having fewer than two classes per quarter scheduled in the lab. And yet, over three-fourths of all the students wanted to see the lab remain open. They regarded the laboratory as a learning tool with high potential if it were used imaginatively. They faulted the present system and the way the teachers used it but did not condemn all laboratories.

A study of the second type designed to arrive at the time period most profitable for lab exposure and also to sample student reactions to various laboratory activities took place at Fort Collins High School in Colorado.²³ For all students regardless of level and at every administration of the questionnaire (five times during the year), the estimated time for effective concentration was about

twenty minutes. It is interesting to note that the number of minutes that the students thought profitable was in all cases lower at the end of the year than it had been at the beginning; this could be interpreted as a statement about their expectations. Also, the fourth year class had no illusions about how long they could concentrate: their estimates on all five administrations of the test were significantly lower than any of the estimates of the other class at any time. (It should be mentioned here that the range for all classes on all administrations was quite limited: lowest estimate, 14.51 minutes; highest estimate, 22.47.) The greatest downward adjustment not surprisingly was for the first year students who revised their optimum time downward by nearly nine minutes. The others revised their estimates up and down an average of three minutes. The preferred language laboratory activity chosen from a multiple choice list was listening and repeating. Next, the students favored listening and comprehending, then group conversation, and lastly laboratory tests.

Finally, several items appear on only a few questionnaires but are of sufficient interest to be mentioned here in connection with student reactions. For example, a contradiction arose when the students were asked if everyone should take a foreign language and then if they planned to continue foreign language study themselves. Forty percent of the respondents in the Edmonds, Washington study believed foreign languages should be required of everyone. But elsewhere in the questionnaire only about one third of the second year students, for whom the next year is voluntary, said they would continue foreign language study, and a majority of all respondents did not plan to take foreign languages once they satisfied the requirement or even later in college. Similarly, beginning students in the University of Kentucky study expressed optimism about their future success in French but over one third of them did not enroll for the next course!

Students gave their opinions of the value of foreign language study and its importance relative to their other subjects. Over half the Edmonds, Washington students considered foreign languages important. The same is true for the San Mateo High School group. Nevertheless, when asked which of their "solids" they would choose to drop, twenty-four percent of the San Mateo students picked foreign languages. In a biographical inventory of the freshman class at the State University of New York at Buffalo,²⁴ forty percent of the class stated they disliked foreign languages more than any other major subject. According to Sarita Schotta, one reason for these negative attitudes may be that students very rarely have a chance to comment on their courses in any way. Harry Reinert comes to the same conclusion. He remembers that the attitudes of his students expressed on a questionnaire he administered ten years ago were not substantially different from those expressed in 1970. From this he surmises that in spite of the tremendous expenditures for new equipment and materials since that time, precious little has been done to improve what bothers the students about foreign language teaching.

If the number of published studies on student expectations and reactions in the form of an attitude study or a student evaluation is any indication of their frequency, there are probably fewer than one would expect. The value of these should not be overrated as a method for isolating and dealing with the ills of the profession. Nevertheless, the use of a questionnaire to determine student expectations at the beginning of the course, and student reactions at the end, would not only offer vital information to teachers which hitherto has been largely ignored, but conceivably would also provide a psychological catharsis to those students who regard themselves as overburdened.²⁵

Notes

¹Wallace E. Lambert and R.C. Gardner, A Study of the Roles of Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1961); R.C. Gardner, "Motivational Variables in Second Language Acquisition," Diss. McGill University, 1960; Leon A. Jakobovits, "The Physiology and Psychology of Second Language Learning," in Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, Vol. I, ed. Emma Marie Berkmaier (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1969); H.J. Feenstra, "Aptitude, Attitude and Motivation in Second Language Acquisition," Diss. University of Western Ontario, 1967.

²Robert J. Nelson et al., "Motivation in Foreign Language Learning," in Foreign Languages and the 'New' Student, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1970, Reports of the Working Committees, ed. Joseph A. Tursi, pp. 31-104.

³Nelson, p. 46.

⁴T. Mueller, "Student Attitudes in Basic French Courses at the University of Kentucky," MLJ, 55(1971), 290-298.

⁵Please consult the Appendix for a list of the studies consulted in the preparation of this memorandum.

⁶"Student Position Paper," The Michigan Foreign Language Newsletter, 1 (Jan. 1972), 17-19.

⁷Leon A. Jakobovits, "Research Findings and Foreign Language Requirements in Colleges and Universities," FLA, 2(May 1969), 452.

⁸Don R. Iodice, "The Learner's Side of the Desk," Newsletter of the Michigan FLA, 3, No. 2 (1969), 4-11.

⁹Sarita Schotta, "Student Evaluation and Foreign Language Programs," FLA, 6 (March 1973; seen in MS).

¹⁰Iodice, p. 5.

¹¹Schotta, p. 30.

¹²Robert A. Morrey, "Attitudes of Students and Teachers to Individualized Foreign Language Instruction," in Individualizing Foreign Language Instruction, eds. Howard B. Altman and Robert L. Politzer (Newbury House, 1971), pp. 21-53.

¹³Harry Reinert, "Student Attitudes toward Foreign Language -- No Sale!" MLJ, 54 (Feb. 1970), 107-112.

¹⁴Helen Warriner, "Student Attitudes toward Foreign Language Study -- Results of a Survey," Public Education in Virginia, 8, No. 1 (Spring 1972), 4-7.

¹⁵John B. Dalbor et al., "A Look at Student Attitudes and Opinions on Foreign Languages," ADFL Bulletin, 1 (March 1970), 56-64.

¹⁶These are Lambert's terms and strictly speaking, an instrumentally oriented student is one who sees on his own the utilitarian value of knowing a language either from an educational or an employment outlook. In the above case, the student takes the foreign language on the advice of a parent or counselor who we assume has utilitarian reasons for offering this advice. Thus, by extension we can for the purpose of this study include this student in the instrumentally oriented category.

¹⁷Iodice, p. 7.

¹⁸Jakobovits, Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, Vol. I, p. 216.

¹⁹M.P. Hagiwara, "A Survey of Foreign Language Staff Toward the Language Requirement," Foreign Language Courier of the University of Michigan, No. 42 (June 1969), pp. 22-57.

²⁰Mueller, p. 292.

²¹Schotta, p. 24.

²²Ibid., p. 22.

²³C.O. Neidt, D.E. Hedland, "Student Reaction to High School Language Lab Activities," MLJ, 49 (1965), 471-475.

²⁴Paul Jane et al., Freshman Class Biographical Inventory 1968-69, State University of New York at Buffalo, February 1969, ED 049 473.

²⁵At the time of the writing of this memorandum, I had not yet obtained several studies which may prove to be of interest. Professor Ryder suggested that I consult a study done at Indiana University. Dr. Helen Warriner, supervisor of foreign languages for the State Department of Education of Virginia, gave me the names of two school systems, Alexandria and Falls Church, that have recently used attitude questionnaires.

The questionnaire devised by L.A. Jakobovits and presented by Working Committee I at the Northeast Conference in 1970 was never used to any significant degree, according to Robert Serafino, another member of the Working Committee. To his knowledge there is no data resulting from that questionnaire.

Appendix

I Student Attitude Studies

Place	Date	Number of Respondents
Edmonds High School Edmonds, Washington	1970	1,000
San Mateo H.S. District San Mateo, California	1970-71	1,200
Fort Collins High School Fort Collins, Colorado	1965	620
New England -- an unnamed high school	1969	47
Michigan -- students from high schools and colleges	1971-72	16
Virginia -- high schools	1970	4,100
University of Illinois	1968	863
University of Kentucky	1970	175
University of Michigan	1969	n/a
SUNY Buffalo	1969	1500-2000
Pennsylvania State University	1968	1,549
State University -- unnamed	1972	265

II Attitudes of Students toward Texts
University of Kentucky study
MLJ, 55, 1971

	First Semester		Second Semester	
	A A-L text	B A-L text	C Programmed text	D Traditional text
Grammatical explanations				
Clear	28%	25%	63%	12%
Unclear	50%	62%	13%	57%
Sufficient	30%	13%	44%	15%
Insufficient	42%	53%	25%	59%